

National Park Service

Urban Matters: Communities of Practice

February 3, 2014

The Collaborative for Innovative Leadership serves as the formal organizational space in the NPS to support developing and institutionalizing a 21st century leadership culture, Service-wide. The Collaborative should be imagined as a network of leadership laboratories. It will focus on ways to rapidly share knowledge, new approaches, and insights from practical experience to address critical problems and advance organizational excellence. The Collaborative will utilize both online platforms and field-based experiential learning. The way the Collaborative works—through collaboration, horizontal communication, learning from experience, collegial interactions, and leadership that supports rather than controls—models what is envisioned as the NPS “collaborative way.”

In 2012, nearly 1,000 people met in New York City to participate in the City Parks Alliance, Greater & Greener Conference. Following the conference, thirty-nine NPS leaders met as an “affinity caucus” on national parks and programs in urban areas and identified a series of actions to progress an NPS urban agenda to improve organizational relevance. The central tenet of that cause is that the work of the National Park Service is relevant to all Americans. NPS must engage a broad spectrum of the country’s diverse population, 80% of whom live in metropolitan areas, with the places and narratives that have shaped America. Following the caucus, the NPS Conservation Study Institute (CSI) was asked to support the urban initiative under the auspices of the Collaborative for Innovative Leadership. The task was to expand the conversation beyond

those that were at the caucus through the development of an engagement strategy that would enlist many more NPS and partner interests in urban areas.

A small, diverse group of NPS urban leaders were selected to prototype a process that would allow the caucus recommendations to move forward. The “urban strategists” recognized that a different approach was needed to help urban parks and programs “step into their power.”

Highly intentional efforts to create communities of practice that connected urban practitioners, using multiple modes of communication (online, face-to-face, webinar, conference call, social media, etc.) were established to facilitate discussions on key urban topics, beginning with those identified as the six action items at the caucus meeting.

The first Urban Matters community conversations identified crosscutting themes, trends, and issues in the urban parks community. The information was then compiled, analyzed and primary themes were highlighted. These highlights were featured on the Urban Matters website for participants to review and offer feedback. The second and third community sessions focused on developing action items for the Agenda. Using the themes and issues from the previous discussions, community leaders facilitated conversations centered on potential action steps that could be taken to foster collaboration, empower practitioners, and create positive change in urban parks.

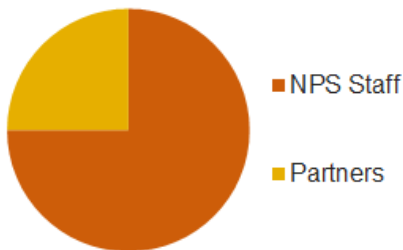
Urban communities

16 Sessions Completed:

350 Total Participants

96 Avg. # Per Community

28 Avg. # Active in Each Community



Community Themes

The following themes emerged from the community conversations.

Make Parks Community Spaces

Local roots, national appeal: these are two unifying characteristics that all urban parks share. These powerful characteristics of urban parks can motivate NPS staff to be aware of the needs of both the local residents and the visitors coming to parks. This may entail clarifying procedures and increasing the information available to local citizens who are interested in using Park Service space in non-traditional ways.

Just ask. Simple, personal invitations that entice community members to come enjoy the park will go a long way in making them feel welcome.

Flexible policies for special events can help urban parks make the most of their space and boost rapport with

local citizens. National parks in urban areas can serve as critical community gathering spaces through special events. Existing National Park policy is fairly flexible in this regard and it is essential that the NPS work toward adaptable, community-driven policies for supporting special events.

Market the opportunities within urban parks that are available to local residents. When hosting NPS discussions, steps should be taken to invite state and local city park officials to take an active role in the forum.

Reach Beyond Our Boundaries

Participate in community meetings and events even when the NPS does not have an issue at stake. Be present for discussions that might not directly benefit the Park Service but support relationship development. Continually make efforts to meet with a wide range of community leaders, not just political leaders or government officials.

Be entrepreneurial in engaging partners and programs. Having a staff that is willing to go out, build networks and explore funding possibilities with other community groups.

Reach out beyond the conventional suspects. Involve the health community, HUD, and economic development committees in park-community activities.

The NPS is part of a larger picture. The Leadership must affirm a new model for the NPS role and engagement practices in urban areas and. Specifically, NPS leaders (NLC, RDs/Ads, and Superintendents/program leaders) must guide the agency's culture and paradigm away from seeing itself as the center of this work toward prioritizing its urban agenda to serve the needs of the communities.

Encourage and develop a professional team of staff for community outreach and relations. Leadership could encourage the development of skills, expertise and position descriptions – such as community planners or liaison positions or staff roles to facilitate integration of community relations expertise into park management personnel structure.

Expand collaboration with local, state or regional entities on coordination of urban roles and agendas. The NPS can expand current involvement and should join existing regional or state efforts that coordinate local and state parks, tourism, department of natural resources, and other public/private providers, coalitions or agencies. In addition, consider working with park partners to write park staff position descriptions in order to tune into what the community members value.

Expand health connections and park access. There are NPS park or program connections in tens of thousands of communities across the country. These sites have had a significantly contributed to the health of citizens. Parks should aim to understand

community health and transportation needs and identify ways they can help address those needs including physical access, public transportation, alternative transportation, education or marketing programs, direct community assistance and outreach (urban gardens, natural playgrounds, safe routes to school). NPS can pursue national and regional partnerships with health providers or interests as part of the Healthy Parks/Healthy People campaign.

Amplify existing work being done in communities. Add value to existing programs and plug into these areas. Ask what we can do for the community

Streamline and encourage partnership formulation with smaller partner organizations. NPS should facilitate ways to encourage the cities and the NPS to work with smaller groups and community partner organizations as often smaller organizations can be more effective, nimble and responsive- and have more local support and sponsorship.

Examine the Relevancy of Parks to New Audiences

Policies should be geared toward forging new ties with populations who have not previously engaged with the Park Service. If the urban community is struggling with a host of social issues, we are not going to be effective if they are struggling with their own needs. Urban parks must create an added benefit to the lives of urban residents. In places where people do have access, a deep connection is still lacking. It is all about addressing what value the NPS could bring to their lives.

Analyze how urban parks are being used by the community. Ask for their perspectives to better assess level, quality, types of Park Service presence in these communities.

Identify a portfolio of possible park uses that will connect nontraditional audiences with their urban parks in a meaningful, culturally relevant way.

Promote park and partner programs to urban high school and college students. A lot of students are not aware of urban parks and these employment opportunities.

Actively strive to attract a multicultural audience at urban park events. Stories and activities in parks should

showcase something in the park for all demographics.

Team with organizations that work with the demographic the NPS would like to see in greater numbers at the park.

Build on what is working

Use urban parks as a mechanism for urban populations to learn about the natural world in which we live; connect people's lives with the relevance of ecological systems.

VIPs are a great asset. Leverage volunteers as a workforce and as advocates.

Communicate the total economic value of parks. Identify and communicate the value of the park to local communities through research and information. The real value could be publicized in a number of ways, including an annual report relaying the value of that particular urban park.

Telling the Complete American Story

Look at the stories that we tell and the stories we do not tell. Broaden our narrative to include our ethnically and culturally diverse country.

Examine our historical past as it relates to race relations in order to help us understand the challenges we are facing as we try to create a more diverse, inclusive agency.

Are urban parks striving to tell stories relevant to racially and ethnically diverse communities? If not, strengthen park efforts to develop and share the stories of all Americans.

Shift the narrative to make parks part of the fabric of local communities. Tell the history of the park as it relates to the community and treat parks as gathering places. Things that are necessary in this pursuit include storytelling, signage, maps (seamless connections), branding, and graphic identity (adapted to the community).

Make the Business Case

Clarify Park Service leasing policies. The NPS has a number of unused and underused buildings, including historic structures, which require substantial funding for maintenance and rehabilitation. Leasing is one way parks may be able to reduce this burden. Regions, parks, and programs need to embrace leasing and work to identify and address barriers to leasing, including clarification of policies. Reevaluate policies toward nonprofit tenants leasing Park Service buildings and encourage greater freedom for their income generating activities. There is also a need to enable greater freedom for the NPS to use buildings and facilities outside park boundaries.

Historic tax credits and other related programs can help NPS get a higher profile for the credits' contribution to a community's economic health and development-through press, marketing, etc. We need to communicate that story better. Focus on the outcomes of tax credit programs to represent preservation aspects and values.

Alignment of Parks, Programs, and Message

Strategic alignment of the Urban Agenda with youth, health, relevancy, diversity and inclusion (RDI) initiatives are critical. Youth, health and urban initiatives or agendas need to be synchronized and the National Park Service has not fully recognized the relationship between its diversity efforts and its broader community engagement work.

Use the 'national park' title in all parks throughout the service as a way to unify and clarify the park service. In preparation for the Centennial, it would be beneficial to work internally to name ourselves in such a way to help the public understand who we are.

Extend NPS brand when working with partners and other NPS program offices (Heritage areas, State and Local Assistance Programs) in order to have a consistent branding message. Compile examples of parks and partners using the arrowhead to illuminate appropriate ways to apply the arrowhead in co-branding situations. The NPS could also explore use of its "affiliate" designations and opportunities to co-brand with state and local or even private cultural or natural resource protection interests.

Treat the arrowhead as a marketing opportunity for both park service staff and partners, not merely as a compliance issue.

Collaborate on marketing and promotion. As part of the Centennial and the Grey advertising campaign, the NPS should specifically market and promote opportunities to visit and recreate in our urban park areas. This marketing could be done on transit lines and could be sponsored by partners such as business groups, local state tourism offices, and encourage anyone who wants to promote the park to do so.

Exchange Experiences, Broaden Understanding

Establish internship, exchange programs or Intergovernmental Personal Agreements, etc. with economic development agencies such as Housing & Urban Development (HUD). Motivate park employees and managers to become a part of a local economic development organization (e.g. chamber of commerce). Use grant programs for cross- agency trainings and externships.

Continue urban communities of practice. Whether it is a community dedicated to urban policy or urban partnership parks, communities of practice keep the lines of communication open, create and share knowledge, and collectively solve tough issues facing urban parks.

Develop skills, curricula, webinars and other training opportunities for both staff and partners to support them in working collaboratively with communities. Topics could include youth engagement, alternative funding and assistance sources; roles of regional/state/local planning, transportation, economic development processes, and philanthropy.

Make better use of existing data or create new decision support tools to help the agency better target limited resources. NPS should link to, develop or work in partnership with universities and other agencies to analyze how and where NPS should engage or support urban areas. By strategically targeting resources, the NPS could have a much more effective and larger urban impact.

Set up a lasting urban parks website to disseminate best practices, share ideas about current projects, and link professionals working on similar initiatives.

Park managers are not aware of monetary resources available to urban parks. Develop a way to better publicize these resources and share knowledge of their existence with other park and partner staff.

Consider looking to MOA and cooperative agreements to allow for active participation to overcome “rules” and resource constraints.

Focus on Future Generations

Invest in youth work experience programs such as the Santa Monica Mountains Youth Program and the Student Career Intake Program in the Boston Area parks.

Design the program to reach promising students early in the process of forming their career decisions. Target racially diverse youth from local urban high schools and colleges.

Emphasize the importance of our urban park service staff and program professionals viewing life through the lens of urban youth.

Have systems of support in place for new hires. Training and mentoring are critical elements for easing NPS culture shock.

Reform Our Youth Hiring and Entry Programs

Diversity in the NPS: Delegate the use of Intergovernmental Personnel Act to Superintendents. If NPS had the option to tap into talent of staff from adjoining agencies on a nonpermanent basis, we could benefit tremendously.

Increase awareness and marketing of existing hiring and employee development programs. Clarify how the Direct Hire Authority works and encourage NPS staff to use it.

Find ways to work within the current structure of the Pathways program while offering feedback and ideas for reforming the program.

Further develop the ideas behind the Public Land Corps Hiring Authority to allow students to work for those third parties. Students who work for third parties like the SCA would be able to log their hours in an online web portal and once they reach 640 hours they would be eligible for a non- competitive appointment.

Communities & Community Leaders

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Urban Parks as Portals for Diversity

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